

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARD

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Abstract: The article is devoted to European integration and the impact of some significant events on the EU enlargement. It looks at key historical events that led to the unity of 27 EU Member States and emphasizes the difficult but meaningful process towards diversity and inclusion. Eurosceptic views and disintegration modes are not disregarded either. Despite the rise of nationalist orientations in Europe and crises related to the Eurozone, refugees, Brexit, COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and Schengen, the authors determine the enhanced cooperation between states as the way ahead in dealing with difficulties and various current challenges.

Keywords: European integration, Euroscepticism, unity, diversity, enhanced cooperation

ИНТЕГРАЦИЯТА: ПОГЛЕД КЪМ МИНАЛОТО ЗА ОБЩОТО ЕВРОПЕЙСКО БЪДЕЩЕ

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Резюме: Статията е посветена на европейската интеграция и влиянието на значими събития върху разширяването на ЕС. Тя разглежда ключови исторически процеси, довели до обединението на 27-е държави – членки на ЕС, и акцентира върху сложния, но целенасочен процес към многообразие и приобщаване. Евроскептичните възгледи и дезинтеграционните процеси също не са пренебрегнати. Въпреки възхода на националистическите ориентации в Европа и кризите, свързани с еврозоната, миграцията, Брекзит, COVID-19, войната в Украйна и Шенген, авторите определят засиленото сътрудничество между държавите като път напред в справянето с трудностите и съвременните предизвикателства.

Ключови думи: европейска интеграция, евроскептицизъм, единство, многообразие, засилено сътрудничество

Introduction

The European integration as we observe it today has gone a long way, which has not always been easy and smooth. It has been admired, encouraged and enhanced but at the same time it has been challenged, questioned and repeatedly opposed. Due to various controversial theories related to European integration, conflicts and events not only on the territory of the European continent but worldwide, the question of whether the European Union will withstand and manage the

difficulties it faces as a community, is on the agenda. While searching for the relevant answer, one needs to reflect on the past, analyse and learn from it in order to proceed with what the future holds.

Brief historical insights into European integration

In 1923, Richard Nikolaus Eijiro, Count of Coudenhove-Kalergi (1894-1972) published his book “Pan-Europa”, in which he developed the idea of creating a pan-European union. He argued that Europe’s dominance over the rest of the world was over. The continent was in anarchy and was facing the threat of political, economic and cultural catastrophe. However, Europe could be saved by modernizing its political system and cooperation between states in various areas. Kalergi proposed convening a European conference with the participation of representatives from 26 countries, concluding agreements to settle disputes between them, developing a customs union and preparing a draft for a federal European constitution. Kalergi’s proposals used the numerous earlier projects for the unification of Europe. His views were the first concrete and comprehensive plan for the federal structure of Europe in the 20th century while preserving the system of nation-states and their rights. Kalergi's ideas aroused the interest of a number of political figures such as Winston Churchill, Konrad Adenauer, and especially Aristide Briand /1862-1932/. Briand called for a European confederation within the framework of the League of Nations and in May 1930 distributed a memorandum to 27 member states of the League of Nations in which he set out his ideas. Defending his project, he noted that the peoples who can geographically be called the peoples of Europe should have the opportunity at any time to be in contact, to discuss their interests, to make common decisions, to be in solidarity in possible serious circumstances. Obviously, the association should prevail in the economic sphere. Furthermore, he was convinced that from a political and social point of view, a federal union without infringing on the sovereignty of the individual nation could be quite useful¹. Briand used concepts such as “common market”, “European Union” and “specific policies”, emphasized the necessity for the development of trans-European transport networks and to some extent anticipates what we today call the regional and social policy of the European Union.

In 1948, a Congress of Europe was convened in The Hague, which was almost the last major event preceding the Schuman Declaration on the establishment of the European Coal and

¹ “Мир в XX веке” под редакцией акад. А.О.Чубарьяна, М., Наука, 2001, с. 277.

Steel Community. The Congress called for, and this was a new and revolutionary action - “the European nations to transfer to the Community some of their sovereign rights, so that they may be exercised jointly”². This principle would later become a fact in the practice of the European Union. In fact, this is also the key to understanding the question of why the European Union is a qualitatively new interstate entity. This partial renunciation of sovereignty found expression first in the economic, and later in the financial, political and other spheres of common activity. Although embodied in the practice of the newly established union, neither the Schuman Declaration nor the founding treaties of the European Communities themselves directly mentioned the issue of sovereignty or its renunciation. Considering how strong the sensitivity of the countries participating in the Communities to this problem is, these documents regulated the structure and functioning of the European institutions. Moreover, the disposal of sovereignty is the right of each state and it is up to it to decide whether and at what precise moment to exercise it³.

The idea of European unity became practically possible and feasible only after the end of World War II when Europeans finally realized that nationalism could and should be eliminated in the name of regional cooperation.

Conditions under which European integration began

The Second World War had a profound impact on subsequent events and was itself a catalyst for the movement towards European unity. As the political scientist Alan Milward notes, it is difficult not to exaggerate the destructive consequences of the second global conflict. In just two years between 1938 and 1940, three of the twenty-six European countries were annexed, ten were occupied by enemy forces, one was occupied against its will by the Allied powers, and four were occupied and divided. The existence of two others was reduced to the status of satellites⁴. By the early 1940s, there was no longer any doubt that national governments individually could not cope with their main task – the protection of the territorial integrity of their countries. It is therefore

² Миланов, М. (2001). Идеята за обединена Европа от древността до средата на двадесети век. *Европейска интеграция и медии* (с. 15-36). София: Проект Темпус „Университетски център за продължаващо обучение.“

³ It is the right of each EU Member State to assess for itself whether a change to the constitution or another act is necessary upon its accession to the EU, as well as upon its “deepening”. For example, upon adoption of the TEU, some Member States consider that the unification is entering a qualitatively new stage and a new transfer of sovereign rights is necessary, which requires an amendment to their constitutions. Other Member States believe that the adoption of the TEU can be carried out on the basis of the same fundamental laws that were in force upon the adoption of the founding treaties and the EEA.

⁴ Alan S. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation State*, London, Routledge, 1944, p. 4.

not surprising that ideas for various alliances, even the idea of an “Anglo-French federation”, quickly gained popularity⁵. The sudden change in traditional English isolation and the British view of the inviolability of national sovereignty were also due to the growing external danger. As early as 1940, a political observer pointed out that after the end of the war what would really be needed was “at least an alliance between Great Britain, France and Germany. With such an alliance the war in Europe could be forgotten forever. Without it, the wars would continue⁶.”

After the end of the war, the balance of power in the world had already changed. Having begun as a European one and then turned into a global one, the conflict ended, bringing to the fore the two superpowers - the United States of America and the Soviet Union. By the end of the 1940s, both the United States and the USSR already had a clearly defined policy regarding Europe and its reconstruction. In 1946, it became obvious that the Soviet Union intended to consolidate its influence and establish military and political hegemony over the eastern part of Europe. The division of the continent into eastern and western parts led to the deepening participation of the United States in the development of Western Europe. The United States was ready to unite its national interests with those of the Western European democracies, which only with American support could become a counterweight to Soviet expansionism. By this time, the Truman Doctrine⁷ had already been announced, and most European leaders were convinced of the seriousness of the Soviet threat, reinforced by the Berlin Blockade in 1948. Western European countries could count on American aid for their recovery, military protection, and increased trade with the United States. On June 5, 1947, US Secretary of State George C. Marshall proposed a program for the economic recovery of post-war Europe. The official name of the Marshall Plan was the European Recovery Program. As a result, Western European countries united in the Organization for European Economic Cooperation, established in April 1948. The United States insisted that European participants in the recovery program decide for themselves how exactly the aid would be distributed among the individual countries. Cooperation and coordination were the main goals of the Organization for European Economic Cooperation⁸.

⁵ McKay, David, *Rush to the Union*, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1996, p. 3.

⁶ Mackay, R.W.G., *Federal Europe*, London, Michael Joseph, 1940, p. 23-24.

⁷ Truman Doctrine 1947 – for immediate economic and military assistance to the governments of Greece and Turkey, as well as other countries threatened by Soviet influence. For the first time, the United States intervened in peacetime in the affairs of countries outside the Americas.

⁸ Between 1948 and 1952, Western European countries received a total of 13.37 billion US dollars, and West Germany alone received 1.39 billion US dollars. The money under the Marshall Plan was distributed as subsidies or long-term

Although it was the former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in Zurich on September 16, 1946, who called on the enemies to reconcile and raised the idea of creating a “United States of Europe,” we should not forget the specific British interests, that the most important for England were its special relations with the United States and the British Commonwealth. Churchill himself was probably guided more by the idea of “cementing” the Franco-German unity in the form of an economic union than by the idea of renouncing sovereignty and creating new supranational institutions.

In such conditions, European cooperation began to take place. The first initiative was the creation of the Council of Europe in May 1949. The negotiations revealed the positions of the participants - positions that generally remained unchanged in the following decades. The first group of countries - Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg /which had already made an attempt at a customs union immediately after the end of the war/ and Italy preferred an institutional structure similar to the federal one. Great Britain, Ireland and the Scandinavian countries, in accordance with the canons of “old diplomacy”, preferred the creation of a forum for classical intergovernmental cooperation, excluding any infringement of national sovereignty. Finally, France saw the integration process primarily as establishing control over the recovery of the German economy without the risk of a possible revival of German militarism. The initial negotiations on European reconstruction were conducted without German participation. By September 1949, France, Great Britain and the United States had merged the administrations of their occupation zones on German territory. After the creation of the two German states, an offer of economic cooperation was almost immediately made to the new Federal Republic of Germany. France was concerned and insisted on control over the industrial zones located around the Rhine, thanks to which the power of the German army was restored in the 1930s. A compromise was reached in early 1949 with the creation of the IRA (International Ruhr Authority). The Treaty explicitly stated that the resources of the Ruhr area would not in future be used for aggression⁹. The IRA was actually the institution for managing these resources, in which Great Britain, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, the three Benelux countries and the USA were represented. However, the IRA did not satisfy anyone. The French were convinced that the British and

loans. From the very beginning, the Marshall Plan also served purely American interests in militarily strengthening Western Europe, thus setting limits to the influence of leftist ideas and communism after World War II.

⁹ Archer, C. and Butler, F. *The European Union Structure and Process*, 2d edition, 1996, Pinter, London.

Americans allowed the Germans to produce coal and steel in large quantities, while the Germans considered it very unfair that only their heavy industry should be placed under such international control. Also, the mistakes of the recent past, committed against the defeated countries with the Paris Peace Treaties of 1919, should not be repeated.

At this point, a new solution to the problem was proposed. Karl Arnold, Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia, which included the Ruhr area, proposed that the IRA control should also extend to areas of France, Belgium and Luxembourg. Coal and steel production in Western Europe practically took place in the border regions of France, West Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg, which made it interdependent. At that time, coal and steel production was the backbone of heavy industry and the main prerequisite for arming the army. There were fears that, as after the First World War, a recession could follow in these industries, which would lead to cartel associations, which national governments would have difficulty controlling. In 1950, it was coal and steel that became fertile ground for a political initiative related not only to this industry, but also to Franco-German relations, and on a larger scale to the peace and prosperity of the European continent.

The declaration of 9 May 1950 by the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, on the basis of which the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC)¹⁰ was signed in April 1951, adhered to the plan developed by Jean Monnet¹¹. It stated that the path to a united Europe lay in ending the long-standing rivalry between France and Germany. Control over coal and steel production was to be exercised within the framework of an organization that was also open to other European countries. This was a guarantee that any war between France and Germany was not only unthinkable but practically impossible¹².

When talking about the European Coal and Steel Community, the following circumstances should be taken into account:

1. The main motive behind this integration initiative is more political than economic;
2. The first step in the integration process was carried out in only one industry, on the basis of which a plan for a complete economic union was gradually developed later;

¹⁰ The ECSC Treaty expired on 23.07.2002, after 51 years of existence.

¹¹ Monnet, Jean /1888-1979/ - after World War II, he led the program for the economic recovery of France; architect of the “Schuman” plan, which grew into the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, and of the “Pleven” plan for a common European defense. His ideas were also the basis for the creation of the European Economic Community in 1957. Monnet was one of the greatest supporters of European federalism.

¹² Tillotson, J. *EU Law: Text, Cases, Materials*, 1996 Cavendish.

3. Of particular importance was the creation of new European institutions, most notably the High Authority, under whose control the production of coal and steel by the member states was placed. The independence of the High Authority was balanced by the Council of Ministers, in which the interests of the member states were represented. An Assembly (later called Parliament) and a judicial body were also created. In practice, the supranational High Authority had the power to make decisions binding on enterprises in a member state, without the need for additional intervention by the respective state. This meant abandoning the classic intergovernmental approach to international relations in favor of supranationality. It is important to note that all the international organisations that had existed up to that time, such as the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation, the Brussels Pact for Mutual Assistance and Collective Defence¹³ and the subsequent treaty establishing NATO, as well as the Council of Europe, were traditional intergovernmental agreements, and even the Council of Europe, despite the established Parliamentary Assembly, had no real powers of action without the consent of the sovereign member states. Regarding the new supranational approach to international relations, Jean Monnet wrote that cooperation between nations, however significant, does not solve anything. What must be sought is the fusion of the interests of the European peoples, and not simply the maintenance of a balance between these peoples¹⁴. The moment had come when the partial renunciation of national sovereignty became part of the national interest. Despite the federalist rhetoric, Monnet was above all a practical politician and advocated gradually expanding cooperation between states.

Supranationality is a complex phenomenon and the main elements that must be present are the following:

- Political and functional autonomy of the supranational organism in relation to the states that created it. This means that the bodies of the supranational association consist of members who are not representatives of individual governments, are not guided by their instructions and are not accountable to them for their activities.
- The voting mechanism in the governing bodies is built on such principles that the decisions taken reflect the will of the majority and are binding on all member states.

¹³ Signed in 1948 between Great Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg as a continuation of the so-called Dunkirk Pact of 1947 between Great Britain and France.

¹⁴ European Union Handbook, ed. by Philippe Barbour, 1996, Fitzroy Publisher, London.

- The bodies of the supranational grouping directly legislate on the entire territory of the United States, and in certain areas, their jurisdiction ignores the national jurisdictions of the member states.

Basic principles of the Monnet method

1. In place of Europe torn apart by nationalism and totalitarian ideologies, a unified democratic and peaceful Europe must be created. The initiators of the creation of this new Europe must be the Western European countries, guided by the principles of democracy, economic prosperity, social consensus, the principle of peace and equal international cooperation.

2. European unification cannot be created suddenly. It will be built gradually, on the basis of concrete achievements, as a result of which **de facto solidarity** will arise.

3. The construction of a united Europe must begin in the field of economics. Without becoming an end in itself, it meets the daily needs of the participants in the integration to the greatest extent, contributes to the increase in the well-being of the peoples and at the same time least affects the most sensitive areas of state sovereignty /national security, defense, foreign policy/. **Economic integration must precede political integration – integration processes develop from the bottom up, and not vice versa.**

4. The movement towards a united Europe must be **gradual, step-by-step** – from the initial more limited forms of regional integration to more complex and large-scale ones. In the integration process, **simpler tasks are first solved, for which there is agreement between the participants**, and then the solution of more complex problems is moved on, regarding which there are disagreements. For example, the first stage “on the road to a European federation” is the **ECSC, then: a customs union.**

5. The most important condition for the functioning of a united Europe is **the principle of supranationality** – enshrined in the legal basis of the integration union and the system of institutions. Integration institutions have the right to adopt **legally binding decisions** for natural and legal persons in the territories of the Member States, as well as to control their implementation by the relevant states. The basis for this legal bindingness of the acts of the institutions is **the transfer of parts of the sovereignty of the Member States to the European Union (hereafter MSs)**. This transfer of sovereignty is limited: to a certain extent and in certain areas.

After the success of the ECSC, France came up with a proposal to create a common European defense – the Plevnen plan¹⁵. At this point, two events – the outbreak of the Korean War and the Soviet Union’s atomic bomb tests – changed the international situation. The US insisted on a West German military contribution. The French proposal largely aimed to avoid the creation of an independent West German army. Subsequently, the proposal for a European Political Community was also formed, since common defense also implies a common policy. However, the common defense failed both because the French parliament did not ratify the treaty and because the debate on common defense was conducted almost entirely in the language of *realpolitik*¹⁶. The situation in which European defense found itself in the period 1945-1989 has been aptly described as the hazelnut in the nutcracker of the global rivalry between the two world superpowers – the USA and the Soviet Union¹⁷. In the conditions of the bipolar model and bloc opposition, the idea of an independent European defense could hardly become a reality. The strengthening of supranational elements in the new treaties is also a reason for their failure, though - Europe is not yet ready to give up the dogma of national sovereignty in such particularly sensitive areas as defense and security.

Integration vs Disintegration

When talking about European integration, *nationalism* is a topic that should not be overlooked. Since the 2010s national rhetoric has broadened and led to a surge in nationalist parties that contributed to disintegration rather than integration. This was pointed out by the President of the European Council in 2017 Donald Tusk who mentioned threats the EU was about to face, one of which “is characterized by the emergence of nationalist, Eurosceptic, and/or xenophobic movements in several Member States of the EU, such as Hungary, Poland, Austria, and Italy,

¹⁵ On 26 October 1950, French Prime Minister René Pleven presented a plan to the French Parliament for the creation of a European army. It was to be headed by a European Minister of Defence, who would be responsible to the European Parliament. The basic idea of the plan was that the existing national armed forces would be integrated into the European army only partially and that the newly created ones would be subordinated to a common command. The Plevnen Plan aimed to include the armed forces of the Federal Republic of Germany in a supranational European defence organisation. Along with integration in the military field, a political framework for integration was also envisaged.

¹⁶ McKay, David, *Rush to the Union*, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1996, p. 45.

¹⁷ Buzan, B., Kelstrop, M., Lemaitre, P., Tromer, E. and Waever, O. 1991, *The European Security Order Recast*, Pinter, London.

among others”¹⁸. In the same year, even the Franco-German axis saw the increase of the movements. The French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen suggested a referendum about the French withdrawal from the EU (the so-called Frexit). She won a third of the votes in France in the second round of presidential elections while in Germany, for the first time since 1945, an extreme right-wing party gained representation in the Parliament when the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party won 12.9 percent of the votes becoming the country’s third largest political force¹⁹ and in 2025 AfD became second in the national election in Germany - doubling its support in the strongest showing for a far-right party since World War II²⁰.

A plethora of other events, which will be discussed below, have questioned the integration process.

Eurozone debt crisis

The global financial crisis in 2008 had negative effects on the Eurozone countries²¹, especially in 2010, which was the beginning of the so-called Eurozone Crisis. It was one of the key events that resulted in a loss of popular trust in EU institutions and between member states²². As Claus Offe noted, the crisis eroded “exactly those attitudes and motivations that matter as prerequisites for its solution”²³ because what urgently needed to be done was politically unpopular and therefore impossible to achieve without some damage to trust in governance, although not to the idea of democracy itself²⁴. This was because, as scholars of international political economy have pointed out, a sufficient number of people across the political spectrum in recipient and donor states saw European integration as a threat to economic prosperity²⁵. For Ben Rosamond, the effect

¹⁸ Wellings, B. (2022) Nationalism and European disintegration. Nationalism and European disintegration. Nations Natl 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12884>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Moulson, G. *Conservative opposition wins German election and the far right is 2nd with strongest postwar result*, February 25th, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/germany-election-merz-scholz-far-right-afd-ebf16ed38e0beaff7fed9a6d29b32a24>, accessed on April 1st, 2025.

²¹ ‘If the Euro fails, then not only the currency fails ... Europe will fail, and, with it, the idea of European unity’ (Spiegel Online, 2010). The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel made these remarks as the European Union addressed the Greek sovereign debt crisis in May 2010. She dramatically depicted what she believed was at stake in what meanwhile seems to be a durable crisis not only of the Eurozone, but also of the integration process itself.

²² Wellings, B. (2022) Nationalism and European disintegration. Nationalism and European disintegration. Nations Natl 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12884>.

²³ Offe, C. (2015). *Europe Entrapped*. Polity Press, p. 77.

²⁴ Kriesi, H.-P. (2018). The implications of the Euro crisis for democracy. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1310277>, p. 82.

²⁵ Wellings, B. (2022) Nationalism and European disintegration. Nationalism and European disintegration. Nations Natl 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12884>.

of the Eurozone crisis compounded longer-term trends: it hastened the end of the social democratic compact that had framed politics in Western Europe (and was then imperfectly extended to Central Europe via enlargement), which was the key political economy context of the EU's legitimacy²⁶.

Refugee crisis

The wave of immigrants (due to the military conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, as well as political instability throughout the Middle East, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa in the period 2011 – 2015) that has overwhelmed the EU has posed a real challenge, first and foremost, to the stability of the Union, once considered a bastion of security, culture, law and order. In these circumstances, some MSs have chosen to unilaterally declare the restoration of control over national borders, thus jeopardizing the fundamental principle of the Single European Market, i. e. the freedom of movement. The first in a long list of countries to suspend the Schengen Agreement due to the massive influx of refugees was Germany in September 2015. Three days later, Austria followed Germany's example, then Slovenia, Hungary, Sweden and Norway. The very existence of the Schengen area was under threat²⁷.

When it comes to the prospects for resolving the migration crisis, many politicians and experts find them quite pessimistic. As French Prime Minister Manuel Valls noted then, Europe needs to take urgent measures to control its external borders and if Europe was unable to protect its borders, the very idea of Europe would be called into question²⁸. He also specified that it was not Europe itself that would perish, but the European project, European values, the concept of a united Europe²⁹. According to him, Europe could not accept all refugees fleeing the terrible wars in Iraq or Syria; otherwise, the society would be completely destabilized. Valls noted the courage of German Chancellor Angela Merkel on the refugee issue, but stated that her “come and you will

²⁶ Rosamond, B. (2017). The political economy context of EU crises. In D. Dinan, N. Nugent, & W. Paterson (Eds.), *The European Union in crisis*. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 39.

²⁷ Куликова, Ю. О. Проблемы миграции в странах Европы / Ю. О. Куликова. — Текст : непосредственный // Молодой ученый. — 2017. — № 12 (146). — С. 417-420. — URL: <https://moluch.ru/archive/146/41009/>.

²⁸ Cowburn, A. Migration crisis can destroy Europe, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls says, January 22nd, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/migration-crisis-can-destroy-europe-says-french-prime-minister-manuel-valls-a6826676.html>, accessed on April 1st, 2025.

²⁹ Migration flows to Europe have been increasing in recent years. A total of 5.1 million migrants were registered in the EU in 2022. Following Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU provided various forms of support to Ukrainians fleeing the war. The Temporary Protection Directive, which organizes the reception of large groups of people, was activated for the first time.

be accepted” policy could lead to huge changes in the EU³⁰. Some have even posed the question of infectious diseases because of the poor health conditions in the countries of origin and the possible risk of spreading the disorders around Europe.

The fact that the European Union was faced with coping with new and complicated matters has led to the collision between its own values and understandings of humanity, enshrined in relevant international legal documents such as the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The refugee crisis was thus one of the major reasons for distrust and fragmentation and it was also the onset of fears of loss of identity.

Brexit

The unprecedented referendum on leaving the European Union, which the then British Prime Minister David Cameron organized because he had promised his voters so, was a triumph of democracy³¹ – a non-violent debate and a clash of two different visions for the development of a country. The reaction of the official European institutions in Brussels was confusion, surprise, stupor and subsequent threats and intimidation. So surprising were the results of the British plebiscite. At that moment, the process of leaving the United Kingdom began, which gained popularity as “Brexit”. It became one of the “burning crises” for the European project. Mutual accusations rained down between Brussels and London, negotiations stalled, with each trying to get the most for itself – the British, with as many preferences in trade as possible, while the European Union - and with demonstrative punishment of any government that challenges the power of the center.

During the campaign to leave the EU, society and the political class (regardless of political affiliation) were deeply divided between “for” and “against” the referendum question. The ruling Conservative Party itself was in the same position. Prime Minister Cameron and Home Secretary Theresa May campaigned from the “remain” camp. After the vote, when the results became clear,

³⁰ The European Border and Coast Guard Agency, known as Frontex, helps manage the EU’s external borders and tackle cross-border crime. The 2015 migration surge has put national border control authorities under enormous pressure. At the urging of the European Parliament, the EU has extended Frontex’s mandate to provide greater assistance to member states. Frontex helps by deploying officers on the ground, organising aerial surveillance and intelligence gathering, combating illegal smuggling channels and helping to return migrants who have no reason to stay in the EU. The agency’s staff is set to increase from 2,000 to 10,000 by 2027. In December 2023, MEPs adopted a resolution calling on Frontex to respect fundamental rights during border procedures and called for greater accountability and transparency in the agency's work.

³¹ Popov, N., & Popova, R. (2019). Democracy and Digital Sphere: Some Problems. *Revista Inclusiones*, 99-103.

Cameron left politics, and May became prime minister, leading the country into perhaps the worst political crisis since World War II. Her words “Brexit means Brexit” – without half-measures, sabotage, or detours – became the quintessence of her mandate. Her personal opinion has nothing to do with her work as head of the cabinet, which automatically obeyed the sovereign’s request. She herself signed the date of final departure – 11 am on March 29, 2019, while endless threats and hints of reassessment were “flying” from EU officials³². The lessons and conclusions that can be drawn from the situation that has arisen are many such as a decline of the United Kingdom and a decline in London’s international positions³³.

In the British case, skepticism towards the United Europe is always leading, unlike French or German policy. The country's entry, just like its exit, from the common European project is painful. And London's stay in European institutions is associated more with standing on the sidelines than with full inclusion in the integration efforts of the continent. Suspicion and distrust towards Euroscepticism on the Island never left the agenda of supporters of the European idea from the beginning of the twentieth century to 2015.

The Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a weakening of trust in the European Union. This is the prevailing view in Italy, Germany, France and the United Kingdom, according to a survey commissioned by Euronews. The EU has been heavily criticized for its slow rollout of vaccines to countries outside the bloc, as the largest producers are currently within the Union³⁴.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected people³⁵, our societies and our economies, but the EU has successfully overcome it thanks to our cooperation, determination, resilience, science and innovation.

³² Методиев, К. *Великобритания и Европа в процеса на евроинтеграция*, 26.07.2018, <https://www.geopolitica.eu/2018/169-broy-3-2018/2858-velikobritaniya-i-evropa-v-protsesa-na-evrointegratsiya>, accessed on March 31st, 2025.

³³ Аврейски, Н. *Великобритания и Европа. Обединеното кралство и европейската интеграция*, 2016, Фабер, ISBN 9786190003205, с. 222.

³⁴ After more than 3 years, on 5 May 2023, the World Health Organization no longer declared COVID-19 a global health emergency.

³⁵ Димитров, М. Пандемията и постпандемията от ковид-19 и медийните предизвикателства в българското общество. В *сп. „Международна политика“*, 2/2023, Югозападен университет „Неофит Рилски“ - Благоевград, ISSN 2367-5373, с. 44.

The EU has mobilised all available means to help EU countries coordinate their responses, which has included providing objective information on the spread of the virus, effective actions to contain it and measures to overcome the economic and social damage caused by the pandemic.

Across the EU, gestures of solidarity between countries, regions and people have helped to fight and overcome the pandemic.

To support those economically affected by the pandemic and to boost Europe's recovery, safeguarding and creating jobs³⁶, the European Commission has presented a major recovery plan for Europe, using the full potential of the EU budget³⁷.

Despite all the measures undertaken on an EU level such as the recovery plan for Europe, safe COVID-19 vaccines, EU Digital COVID certificate, disinformation fight, the establishment of a European Health Union, Timeline for actions on behalf of different institutions, etc., four in ten people in Germany, Italy and France believe that the coronavirus crisis has compromised the EU's position. This is also the opinion of a majority in the UK. The opinion of respondents is equally diverse on the question of whether Brussels has helped during the Covid-19 crisis. The prevailing opinion among Germans and Britons is that the EU has not been helpful. Italians were the most positive, with four in ten believing that Brussels has helped. Italy was the only country to answer positively to the question - 41.2% of Italians reported the benefits of the bloc³⁸.

Unity, a core value of the EU, has not been manifested during the coronavirus - most respondents in all countries believe that countries have been coping on their own, rather than having a unified plan of action and mutual assistance. A full 69% of Italians think so, followed by 62% of Germans and 58% of French³⁹.

The mixed results show that Covid-19 is a huge test for the future of the Union⁴⁰ – anti-EU sentiment has increased in several countries, such as Hungary and the Netherlands, a founding

³⁶ Ангелова Сл., Л. Христова. Значимост на дигиталните умения за работа в условията на пандемия. Сп. „Международна политика“, 2023, бр. 2, стр. 38; <http://ip.swu.bg/>.

³⁷ *The common EU response to COVID-19*, https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/common-eu-response-covid-19_en, accessed on March 20th, 2025.

³⁸ Касабова, К. *Как Covid-19 застрашава бъдещето на Европейския съюз*, March 19th, 2021, <https://momichetata.com/obshtestvo/kak-covid-19-zastrasava-bdeshheto-na-evropeiski-ya-syuz>, accessed on March 15th, 2025.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Белова Г., Н. Попов. Отново за интеграционните теории – в контекста на кризите и новите реалности. В *Сборник, посветен на 85-та годишнина на проф. д.ист.н. Андрей Пантев „Модерният историк 4. Мащабност, дълбочина, аристократизъм“*, 2024, издателство „Авангард Прима“, София, ISBN 978-619-279-034-9, с. 310.

member of the bloc. Free movement – a fundamental principle enshrined in Article 45 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and developed by secondary EU legislation and the case law of the Court of Justice – has also been restricted.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine

The war in Ukraine, which began on 24th February 2022, was a shock for the EU. There has been a wave of people fleeing the war and seeking protection that has completely reshaped the perceptions of EU member states and citizens about their own future and security. Over the past two decades, the EU has missed many opportunities to become a significant geopolitical factor on a regional and global scale, with Russian aggression in Ukraine highlighting the enormous risks hidden behind this political underdevelopment⁴¹. For decades, member states have deflected, and in some cases even openly obstructed, any attempt to deepen integration in foreign policy and defense. Today, this passivity seems detrimental and incomprehensible.

However, history shows that wars are even further reasons for deepening the cooperation between countries. More than two years after the launch of the Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine, European leaders stand with the Ukrainian people and support them humanitarily, politically and financially. While in Dubrovnik for a key summit on Ukraine, the Bulgarian caretaker Prime Minister Dimitar Glavchev stated that EU enlargement is a cornerstone for peace and prosperity among the peoples of Europe⁴². According to him, the war in Ukraine requires European integration to remain high on the political agenda of the European Union. He expressed hope that Ukraine will maintain its momentum towards unity on the European continent. European integration therefore is a key factor in ensuring security, stability and prosperity in Europe.

Schengen (the case of Bulgaria and Romania)

Bulgaria and Romania's path to Schengen membership is proof of their enduring commitment to European standards and norms. Since joining the European Union in 2007, both countries have undertaken significant reforms, particularly in the areas of justice, corruption and

⁴¹ Димитров Г., И. Илиева, Д. Ангелов. *Войната в Украйна и европейската (дез)интеграция: възможни оси за промяна*. // Общество и право. 3/2022, pp. 21-37.

⁴² Главчев: Разширяването на ЕС е крайъгълен камък за мира и благоденствието на Европа, October 9th, 2024, <https://news.bg/politics/glavchev-razshiryavaneto-na-es-e-krayagalen-kamak-za-mira-i-blagodenstviето-na-evropa.html>, accessed on March 28th, 2025.

border security. These efforts are aimed at aligning with the EU *acquis communautaire* and demonstrating their readiness to take on the responsibilities of Schengen membership.

Although they met the technical criteria for Schengen accession back in 2011, their path had been stalled by concerns from some EU member states on issues such as corruption and judicial independence until 1st January 2025. The decision to finally join the area is a recognition of their continued efforts and reforms in these areas. However, the question of whether Bulgaria was worthy of being part of Schengen was present for more than a decade. Although a full member of the EU, the freedom of movement of people, goods, services, and capital was not fully realized through the abolition of internal border controls. In turn, the establishment of the so-called Schengen “by air and water” on 31st March 2024 further confused citizens and was a prerequisite for further problems with the freedom of residence of EU and Schengen citizens in the area declared to be theirs. This is because, after such a long period of evaluation, distrust accumulates in the ability of the state to cope with the challenges associated with the zone. And although the agreement on “air and water Schengen” was perceived as a positive step for Bulgaria and a “historic moment”, the citizens still felt a sense of tactical refusal to become part of the free zone. In turn, pro- and anti-Schengen campaigns used the media to push their agendas. For example, advocacy groups might use the media to highlight the benefits of Schengen membership, while opponents might highlight the potential risks.

Since 2007, the level of Euroscepticism in both countries has increased, which is reflected in declining trust in the EU⁴³. According to statistics compiled by the authors of 18 standard Eurobarometer surveys published between June 2014 and February 2023 by the European Commission, ordinary people's trust in the EU has decreased from 52% to 45% in Bulgaria and from 58% to 52% in Romania (with a peak of trust in 2015, 68%) over the past decade, leveling off with the European average, which is in 2023 at 47%⁴⁴. After December 8, 2022, when the European Council decided to postpone the accession of the two countries to the Schengen area, a clear skeptical discourse emerged regarding the ability of the Romanian and Bulgarian political classes to achieve their goal. Therefore, examining the role of the media and identifying the topics in the media discourse in covering the countries' path to Schengen is significant, as it increases

⁴³ Ștefănel, A., Momoc, A., & Surugiu, R. (2023). *Downplaying Euroscepticism in Mainstream Media: The Schengen Accession of Romania and Bulgaria*. *Media and Communication*, 11(4), 5-19. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i4.7131>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Euroscepticism. Both Romanian and Bulgarian politicians have emphasized that there are no valid reasons for the veto of Austria and the Netherlands. Although the migration issue has been presented as a major obstacle for both countries, Romanian politicians explained that the migration phenomenon was complex and could not be solved by excluding Romania from the Schengen area. Bulgarian politicians emphasized further that national border controls contributed to the security of all EU countries at the cost of human lives.

Although there has been no mention of the EU, its institutions or other traces of Eurosceptic discourse, the topic has been treated in a populist manner, with an emphasis on the polarization between European unity (“consensus”) and individual elements that oppose it (“elite” from Austria and the Netherlands). There has also been an antagonism between the fact that Romanians and Bulgarians “deserved” to enter Schengen, but politicians with local electoral interests opposed the decision. The populist argument of Romanian and Bulgarian politicians was that, without joining Schengen, the countries would face economic problems and that the Eurosceptic trend would increase because the Eastern countries were not treated equally with the other EU Member States.

Euroscepticism is a reaction to the rejection or delay of accession to European structures and institutions. Romania and Bulgaria are presented in the mainstream media discourse as “defenders of the EU borders”, not of their own national territories, nor as supporters of borders between MSs. The downplaying of Euroscepticism in Romania and Bulgaria occurs for a pragmatic reason: the mediated message is not to leave the EU, but to negotiate in favor of entry into the Schengen area (Europragmatism). Although politicians use populist elements in their speeches⁴⁵, the downplaying of Euroscepticism in the media leads to support for the integration process. Romanian and Bulgarian status quo politicians downplayed the significance of the Justice and Home Affairs Council decision of 8 December 2022 through populist discourse and supported soft Euroscepticism by obscuring the non-implementation of Schengen.

Conclusion

The European integration model and its development through enlargement policies and strengthening the unity between MSs has encountered numerous hardships and controversies. Therefore, it has not always proven to be a straightforward achievement. Analyzing the stages of

⁴⁵ Янков, Ал. Някои аспекти в практиката на ЕСПЧ срещу речта на омразата в: сп. Международна политика, бр. 1 – 2/2022, с. 71-81. www.ip.swu.bg

the process that has led to 27 countries sharing values and working on common policies is crucial and necessary as it shows not only how much has been done during the decades; it is a model illustrating that all the efforts exerted are worthwhile and should be appreciated because Rome is what it is since it was not built in one day. The union must not stop or be at a standstill, but move forward and never cease to evolve in order to achieve the goals set. However, in order to implement its plans, looking back is vital so that one can look ahead. Notwithstanding the challenges faced by European integration such as the eurozone debt crisis, migration crisis, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or Schengen, disintegration does not seem a reliable alternative. Nevertheless, despite the ambitious initiative and the fact that some states have undergone rather unsmoothed entry processes into the bloc, some of which were even rejected since they have not met certain criteria, it is exactly due to the integration process that the European Union has become the largest economic region worldwide, the epitome of mutual tolerance, cultural and linguistic diversity and the greatest community of values.

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